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Booker T. Washington
The Man and His Landscape

The Oaks, home of Booker T. Washington at Tuskegee Institute, was a three-story Queen Anne style house. The property included a conservatory and a well-house. Photo courtesy the Alabama Collection, Detroit Publishing Company.

The Oaks served as the residence of Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute during its formative years. The house and its grounds provide important insight into the life of Washington as an educator, a national spokesman for African Americans, and a family member. The Oaks is incorporated into the historic campus of Tuskegee Institute, which was designated a National Historic Landmark in 1965 and was established as the Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site in 1974.

While much of the work on The Oaks has focused on the residence itself, more recently a Cultural Landscape Inventory (CLI) was undertaken to provide information on the location and historical development of the landscape surrounding the house. The CLI survey consisted of a site visit as well as review of existing narrative, graphic, and photographic records. Additionally, Mr. Edward Pryce, landscape architect and former grounds supervisor for the University, participated in the project. Mr. Pryce's input was important, for as a student at Tuskegee, he worked directly under David A. Williston, one of the first African-American landscape architects who was integrally involved in the development of the campus including The Oaks.

Development of Tuskegee Institute

In the Black Belt of Alabama during Reconstruction, virtually no state legislature representative could be elected without the support of the black vote.[1] With this kind of leverage, "the accounts say, Colonel W.F. Foster, a Confederate Army veteran, and the democratic contender to the Alabama Senate, approached Louis Adams, a former slave and a highly regarded man in the Tuskegee community" concerning support for his election.[2] An accomplished tradesman and educator in trade skills, Adams pledged the black vote to Foster, if he would support a proposal to establish a "Negro Normal School" at Tuskegee.[3]

Upon his election to the state legislature, Foster kept his word and on February 21, 1881, Alabama established the Normal School for colored teachers at Tuskegee. Although passage of the legislation was quite an accomplishment, it afforded a mere $2,000 per annum for teachers' salaries with no provisions for acquiring a physical plant or equipment.[4] The Normal School for colored teachers at Tuskegee in Macon County, Alabama opened in an abandoned cotton plantation populated with a cabin, old kitchen, stable, and old hen house on the property.[5]

Arriving at Tuskegee as principal, Booker T. Washington, a graduate of Hampton Institute in Virginia, opened the Tuskegee Normal School's first class on July 4, 1881. The first permanent building was constructed in 1882, designed by instructors and built by the students.[6] By 1893, the Tuskegee Normal School was incorporated as the Tuskegee Normal and Industrial Institute.

Washington had three objectives for Tuskegee. The first was to train teachers to return to the plantation districts and to show the people there how to put new energy and new ideas into farming as well as into the intellectual, moral, and religious life of the people. The second was to develop crafts and occupational skills to equip students for jobs in the trades and agriculture. The last was to make Tuskegee a complete educational facility that would encompass not only the classroom and workshop, but also training in high moral character and absolute cleanliness.[7]

Tuskegee prospered in part because Washington won widespread support in both the

North and South, and was recognized as one of the leaders of the black race after his speech at the Cotton States and International Exposition in 1895. He traveled extensively and spoke convincingly, making the Institute known and respected among people of wealth and influence.

True to the Tuskegee vision of an all-black institution, Washington brought some of the brightest black talent of the day to Tuskegee. George Washington Carver arrived in 1898 from Iowa State University where he was already a renowned botanist. The first black architect to graduate from Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Robert Taylor, came in 1892 to head the Mechanical Trades Department and ultimately designed many of the campus buildings. Finally, David A. Williston, considered the first black professional landscape architect, arrived at Tuskegee in 1902, and after 1910 served as superintendent of buildings and grounds.[8]

The Oaks, 1899–1925

When he first arrived in Tuskegee, Booker T. Washington, his wife Margaret and children lived in a house that belonged to Tuskegee Institute. Between 1889 and 1893, Washington purchased two parcels of land along Old Montgomery Road, the main road that fronted the campus, for a residence. Using student labor, the construction of the house served as a learning tool for the students. By 1899, construction of the house was underway and the family moved in by August of 1900.

The three-story brick Queen Anne style house was located at the front of the two-acre lot along Old Montgomery Road. Paid student labor, using shovel and pick, likely excavated the site, as this was then the practice of earning and learning at the Institute.

Much of the work of Williston, the landscape architect of Washington's house, still survives at the Oaks. A graduate of Cornell University in 1898, Williston served as Professor of Horticulture and Landscape Gardener at Tuskegee from 1902 to 1906 and then Superintendent of Buildings and Grounds from 1910 to 1929, in charge of building maintenance as well as all landscape planning, construction and maintenance. He oversaw the landscape development of the campus directly until 1929, when he moved to Washington, DC, to enter full-time private practice. From 1929 to 1948, Williston guided the development of the Tuskegee campus as a consultant.

By 1906, Williston's plans for Washington's residence were implemented, including a picket fence on the perimeter of the front and side yards, tree plantings along Old Montgomery Road, numerous tree and shrub plantings, as well as a small line of trees on the eastern property boundary. At the rear of the house were a vegetable garden, cold frames, carriage house, wellhouse, and a gazebo. Adjacent to the gazebo on the house side were young shade trees. Except for the pecans and fruit trees, all the other trees were probably native species transplanted from the surrounding woods into the yard as was the fashion at that time.

During Williston's four-year absence from the campus, it appears Washington relied on George W. Carver for landscape advice. In 1908 he asked Carver:

> I want you to go through my yard and garden carefully and arrange to put out in the yard and in the garden together about two dozen trees or pieces of shrubbery. I want you to make a careful study of the whole situation and put out such trees and shrubbery as will be suitable for that climate. You can get a good many ideas from the various magazines and outdoor life as well as from the catalogues. I want some trees and shrubbery also to put in my chicken yard.[9]

According to the c. 1911 map prepared for the *Historic Landscape Report*, a carriage drive and walkway, both of chert, accessed the lot. The circular carriage drive, located east of the house, circled under the *porte-cochère* and back to the street with a spur leading to the carriage house in the backyard, southwest of the house. The carriage house and barn appear to have been placed in between the flower and vegetable garden. On the largest portion of the backyard, Washington indulged in vegetable gardening and animal husbandry, which gave him the satisfaction of being self sufficient while maintaining his health through exercise. It is unknown whether any of this layout was developed by Williston. However at some point Williston planted a Macartney Rose, which still exists on the western boundary of the site.

Little is known about the fencing and outbuildings at the rear of The Oaks associated with Washington's chickens and livestock. However, a photograph c. 1915 indicates a picket fence edging the side yard, with both low and high board fences around the functional gardens. The location of the chicken yard was also confirmed through an oral history interview of a neighbor.

Booker T. Washington died in November 1915; however, his family remained at The Oaks until 1925, when Margaret J. Washington, Booker T.'s wife, died.

The Oaks, 1925–1974

After Margaret's death in June 1925, the Tuskegee Institute Board of Trustees bought The Oaks from Washington's children. The furniture was sold at auction, except those pieces in the den and in some of the bedrooms, and the den was kept in the same order Washington had given it during his lifetime. For almost 10 years, the rest of the house was maintained by the Women's Club of Tuskegee Institute as a meeting space. Eventually, The Oaks became a student services building and alumni office, and was remodeled in the 1950s for administrative offices. The den, where Booker T. Washington based his operations of Tuskegee for years, was always kept as museum space in honor of Washington.

There is little known about landscape changes during Tuskegee's tenure of The Oaks. A photograph, c. 1934, indicates that the picket fence was replaced with a low brick wall, and simple grass panels and mature trees composed the landscape instead of the numerous trees, shrubs, and benches of earlier photographs. The circular drive was asphalt paved in 1958. Over time the former vegetable garden and area to the south was allowed to go to weeds and trees, such that by the late 1950s when multipurpose courts were constructed on the site, numerous large trees were removed indicating the land had been fallow for some time.

The Oaks, 1974– present

Since 1974, when Congress authorized the Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, NPS tenure of The Oaks has primarily focused on preservation and stabilization of the resource including the landscape. In 1978, the historic landscape of The Oaks was researched with the information compiled into a Historic Landscape Report.

Although a thorough study of plant materials did not occur, there appears to be a combination of historic plant material and new introductions on site. Several extant pecans, cedars, and magnolias have been identified through maps and historic photographs as having existed during the Washington family tenure. Hurricane Opal (1991) did the most damage to the vegetative integrity of the site with the loss of at least two to three large (20-30") pecan trees, and damage to others. Because two of the pecans had been acting as an effective screen between the adjacent parking lot and the house, their loss is highly noticeable. The third pecan was located on the western side of the house. A Macartney Rose hedge (planted by David Williston) and the combination yaupon holly and privet hedges on the east and west edges of the lot were used historically, while some of the foundation planting has been revamped using non-historic ornamental plants. An irrigation system has also been installed. A recently established yucca bed under one of the older red cedars has precedent as seen in historic photographs.

Summary

The cultural landscape of The Oaks offers not only insight into period plantings and uses of The Oaks from its beginnings with the Institute, but also an understanding of the importance of the site as the home of Booker T. Washington, president of Tuskegee Institute. Many of the historic landscape features have been retained since the house was first constructed over 100 years ago, as well as being a showplace for black talent in the fields of architecture, landscape architecture, horticulture, and social and political history.

Notes

1 The Black Belt is a region in Alabama where historically the fertile soils and mild climate were conducive for the growth of cotton. By the 1850s, so many enslaved Africans had been brought to the area, that blacks outnumbered whites by 60 percent to 90 percent. Because of this ratio, the black majority possessed political power by virtue of its superior size.

2 Grandison, Kenrick Ian, "From Plantation to Campus: Progress, Community, and the lay of the Land in shaping the Early Tuskegee Campus." *Landscape Journal*, p. 8.

3 Ibid.

4 Ibid., p. 9.

5 Ibid., p. 6.

6 Ibid., p. 13 .

7 Thompson, Cathy. Booker T. Washington/Tuskegee Institute: Background Research.

8 Grandison, pp. 14-15.

9 Williams-Russell and Associates, Edward L. Pryce, R.L.A. Tuskegee Institute National Historic Site, Tuskegee, Alabama. *Historic Landscape Report.*

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